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SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/BCLTV and DRL

E.O. 12958: NA

TAGS: PHUM PGOV SOCI VM

SUBJECT: VIETNAM: Have Money? Get ESPN (and CNN)!

¶1. Summary: Although the Vietnamese government (GVN) regulates access to foreign television, particularly news channels, enforcement of restrictions is limited and many Vietnamese citizens have access to CNN and other foreign channels. High-level CPV and GVN officials, as well as foreigners are permitted satellite receivers. Cable TV service including a number of foreign channels has been available to the public in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, and Hai Phong since June 2002, while another, more limited, service has been available from 1995. By regulation, access to CNN and some other foreign channels, is limited to senior officials, press offices, think tank staff and foreigners, but in practice, cable service providers are quite flexible because they are trying to compete with the nearly uncontrollable illegal use of satellite receivers. GVN officials admit lax enforcement of foreign TV access restrictions and the GVN appears to tacitly recognize that, as far as foreign television broadcasts go, the genie is out of the bottle. That said, the high cost of access and the language barrier mean that very few Vietnamese actually watch CNN or other foreign news. End Summary.

The Official Line and Regulations

¶2. According to Dao Duy Quat, Vice Chairman of the CPV's Commission for Ideological and Cultural Affairs, the CPV's position is that all foreign news items must be edited before viewing, even by the selected group of GVN and CPV officials permitted to see foreign broadcasts. He acknowledged no discrepancy between this policy and reality. According to a June 18, 2002 Prime Ministerial decision governing the installation and use of satellite receivers, a select group of CPV and GVN officials may have satellite receivers installed in their homes and offices for direct access to foreign channels. This group includes officials at and above the vice minister or vice chairman rank, top provincial-level officials and certain national security related officials. Also, daily newspapers, major television and radio stations, the state news agency, foreign relations journals based in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, and foreigners may have direct satellite access to foreign channels.

¶3. According to the June 2002 decision, only designated State companies may purchase and install Television Receiver Only (TVRO) equipment and provide cable, or "pay" TV service. The decision restricts access to foreign channels through pay TV to the group permitted satellite dishes, provincial-level press offices, and think tank staff with a demonstrated "need to study" what might be on foreign channels. Current regulations require that programs on "Western" channels, excluding music and sports channels, need to be "edited"; however, in reality, pay service providers do not do any editing, claimed a Vietnam Central Television (VCTV) official.

Censorship?

¶4. There is some censorship of foreign programming. VCTV also rebroadcasts some CNN programming as part of its regular, non-fee service. However, from our experience, VCTV does edit sensitive portions of their CNN rebroadcast, which is voiced over in Vietnamese so that the original English is mostly unintelligible. Service interruptions or signal interference on these channels are not uncommon, but it is unclear how many of these events are due to censorship and how many are due to technical problems. The only censorship the GVN has acknowledged recently was of Star World's broadcast of "Apocalypse Now Redux," although this did not affect satellite service. The rationale for this decision is difficult to explain because other movies depicting the Vietnam War such as "Missing in Action" and "Platoon Leader" are not censored.

Domestic Pay TV Services

¶5. Senior officials from VCTV's Cable TV Service confirmed to Emboff that pay TV service, via cable, began in June 2002, after the Prime Minister's decree. One VCTV official noted that for several months after the decree took effect, service providers strictly followed access rules. However providers have become more and more flexible, due to

business reasons, he claimed. In order to subscribe, one completes an application form including contact and employment information. Installation in Hanoi costs VND 638,000 (roughly \$42.50), while a monthly fee of VND 30,000 (less than \$2) is charged for access to five local channels and nine other foreign channels, excluding CNN and BBC. For access to those copyrighted channels, subscribers pay VND 1,700,000 (some \$113) for a decoder, and additional monthly fee of VND 30,000 (less than \$2). Monthly service charges in Ho Chi Minh City are much higher, running at around VND 350,000 (about \$23). Basic Installation in Ho Chi Minh City is also more expensive, VND 750,000 (about \$50).

16. A cable TV service director admitted that illegally imported satellite receivers have been available in the market for several years now. Using this equipment, subscribers to a Thai satellite television service receive access to forty foreign channels at a cost of \$300 annually. The equipment itself costs about \$600, and "quite a number of rich households" have chosen to have it installed, he added. Foreign television programming can be seen in entertainment establishments throughout Vietnam, with sports and music channels appearing to be by far the most popular. Indeed the June 2002 decree coincided with an upsurge in the sale of illegal satellite dishes and the World Cup. Small satellite dishes can be found even in remote areas. A GVN campaign to confiscate and prohibit the sale of illegal satellite dishes in August 2002 quickly fizzled; because, according to some commentators, it was an impossible task.

17. Also according to a pay television service official, the Multi-point Multi-channel Distribution System (MMDS) TV service has been available in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City since 1995, first as part of a technical experimental project. During the 1995-1998 period, with imported Chinese antennas costing about \$80 each, one could receive a number of foreign channels rebroadcast by VCTV including CNN, TV5, MTV, and Cartoon Network. In 1998, it was officially launched as a pay service requiring a decoder box. It is subject to restrictions similar to those on cable service, but has not caught on commercially. MMDS is also available in the southern provinces of Binh Duong, Dong Nai, Long An, and Vung Tau. Installation costs VND 1,700,000 (\$113) and monthly fees for packages of foreign range from VND 45,000 to VND 500,000 (\$3 to \$33).

18. While Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City residents may subscribe to the heavily advertised cable TV service, Hanoi has a cheaper alternative, at least for the time being. Hanoi Television Service is now quietly selling and installing so-called "set-top-boxes" for those who could afford to pay VND 3,000,000 (less than \$200). A set-top-box, or a "digital head", as Hanoians are calling it, allows access to ten foreign channels, including CNN, without any additional charges. There are currently no service charges because the service is still in an experimental phase run by a VCTV subsidiary. Officials from VCTV Cable Television Service asserted that buyers of those expensive "digital heads" are being cheated. "Hanoi Television is just trying to sell as many set-top-boxes as possible, despite their awareness that the experimental project could be over by the end of the year (2003), and fees will be charged from then on," asserted a VCTV Cable Service director.

Who Sees Foreign TV?

19. According to experts from VCTV Cable Television Service, most of their customers are Vietnamese workers at foreign Embassies, international missions and foreign businesses, as well as various GVN employees. One television official claimed that "Most people would find those news items (on CNN) quite boring, except for employees of foreign organizations that know English." Other TV officials suggested that many people in Hanoi who do not meet the requirements set by the June 2002 decree receive cable and MMDS TV service. According to one source, there are about 25,000 cable subscribers in and around Ho Chi Minh City.

10. VCTV's Cable Television Service Director in Hanoi explained the gap between regulations and reality on access to foreign television channels as follows: "There are always certain laws to govern certain things. We have traffic laws in place, but people are still violating them. We need to be flexible for business reasons." Ministry of Culture and Information officials insisted that they follow and enforce regulations on access and "editing" (or censorship), but admitted that there are many people with satellite dishes who should not have them. They refused to state whether enforcing the regulations was not feasible or simply not a priority.

Comment

11. The lax enforcement of television access restrictions

by GVN regulators appears to signal that they realize there is little they can do to block the use of satellite dishes. Likewise, the "flexible" approach of (GVN controlled) cable service providers is a sign that they are attempting to compete with illegal satellite receivers. Especially in Hanoi, short-lived attempts to enforce regulations have had little effect and it seems the GVN has accepted that there is little it can do to directly control access to foreign television. However, the cost of both pay and satellite TV service is well beyond the means of the vast majority of Vietnam's citizens. Moreover, relatively few Vietnamese find CNN or BBC interesting or even comprehensible.

Entertainment, especially sports, is king of foreign TV programming in Vietnam. Also, although hardly scientific, Mission's impression is that it is much easier for Vietnamese citizen to obtain access to foreign TV news channels in Hanoi than in Ho Chi Minh City.

BURGHARDT